

FIRST BAPTIST MEETING HOUSE
North Main Street
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND.

HABS NO. RI -38

HABS
RI,
4-PROV,
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

District of Rhode Island

Historic American Buildings Survey
Philip D. Greer, District Officer
14 College Street, Providence, R.I.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. RI-38

FIRST BAPTIST MEETING HOUSE

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Address: 75 North Main Street, Providence, Providence
County, Rhode Island; between North Main,
Waterman, Benefit and Thomas Streets.

An Addendum to
First Baptist Meeting House
North Main and Waterman Streets
Providence, Rhode Island
in HABS Catalog (1941)

Original and
Present Owner
and Occupant: The Charitable Baptist Society

Present Use: Church

Brief Statement
of Significance: This is the third meeting house of the first
Baptist church in America, founded in 1638 by
Roger Williams. The present building, a well-
known architectural monument, was built in 1774-
1775, and designed by Joseph Brown following
English models.

I. Historical Information

- 1774 The Charitable Baptist Society granted a Charter of
Incorporation, giving it the power to receive and hold
property and to use same for the support of pastors.
- 1774 June 3, ground breaking for the new church.
- 1774 August 29, frame of the new church raised.
- 1775 May 28, new church dedicated "For the Publick Worship
of Almighty God, and also for holding Commencement in."
- 1775 June, steeple raised.
- 1790 Pews added to first gallery.
- 1791 Interior painted for first time, white plaster and medium
gray green woodwork.
- 1792 Crystal chandelier from England installed.
- 1802 Two rooms for the use of church groups were finished
in the Vestry, known as the North Committee Room and
the South Committee Room.
- 1807 Gallery altered to accommodate singers.
- 1819 Large Vestry area adjoining the tower finished for the
newly formed Sunday Bible School.
- 1832 The original high pulpit with canopy and 126 high square
pews removed from the church, and the woodwork painted
white.
- 1834 Organ installed at rear of gallery necessitating removal
of the second gallery for negroes, and changes to the
tower stairs.

- 1838 An interior baptistry was installed, probably beneath the floor of the pulpit.
- 1846 The original Palladian window in the east wall behind the pulpit plastered over, and interior repainted.
- 1873 Earlier clock in the tower replaced by present one.
- 1884 Wing added to east end of the building, open to the auditorium, with a new baptistry, lighted by a stained glass window. Other changes included new pulpit furnishings, replacement of candles by gas fixtures, and renovation of the organ.
- 1914 Gas lighting replaced by electricity.
- 1929 Organ rebuilt and enlarged.
- 1957-1958 Restoration and complete renovation of the church.

II. Architect and Builders

The building committee was headed by Joseph Brown, amateur architect, Jonathan Hammond, carpenter, and Comfort Wheaton, housewright. James Sumner of Boston was in charge of the erection of the steeple, and may have supervised the erection of the whole building.

Joseph Brown is credited as the architect of the building. He owned a copy of James Gibbs, Book of Architecture (London, 1728), and the Baptist Meeting House seems to have been derived from designs in it. The general scheme of the building with its arched ceiling, colossal columns, and balconies, resembles the Marylebone Chapel in London in Gibbs' book, and the tower is copied exactly from one of the rejected tower designs for St. Martin's-in-the-Fields which also appears in the book.

III. Original Construction

The building is 80' x 80', with two tiers of regularly spaced windows, on a sloping lot with the basement at ground level at the west front. An entrance vestibule projects on the front of the church, above which the tower rises 185' above the ground. There are entrances to the auditorium from all four sides, but the main entrance is by a double stairway from the vestibule below the tower. The square auditorium is divided into a nave with single aisles by rows of four colossal, fluted Doric columns on each side. A gallery around the rear and both sides intersects the columns. There is an elliptical vaulted ceiling over the nave, and groined vaults over the aisles made of plaster, and hung from the timber roof trusses above. Seating capacity 1400. Cost £6,420.

IV. Restoration of 1957-1958

This work was done under Perry, Shaw and Hepburn, architects, and Antoinette F. Downing, consultant mainly on colors. The restoration was largely based on Isham, The Meeting House of the First Baptist Church in Providence. Interior restora-

tion concerned mainly the east wall of the church, where the 1884 baptistry was closed off from the main auditorium by a shuttered Palladian window in the position of the original window, and a three-level, high, paneled wood pulpit installed. Original paint colors were restored with white plaster, and medium gray green woodwork with some of the ornament picked out in gold.

V. Supplemental Information: The following information on the 1957-1958 renovation and restoration of the church is transcribed from a printed, descriptive folder available at the church:

". . . In 1956 two committees began the study of ways and means to restore the building so that it might fulfill its destiny for generations to come. As a result of correspondence and conferences, Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., graduate of Brown in 1897, made an enabling gift of \$500,000 saying that he was moved to co-operate because of the religious, architectural and historic significance of the building and because of desire to retain the place of the Meeting House in the tradition of Alma Mater. The gift has meant complete rehabilitation and restoration that will add at least another hundred years, if it is so willed, to the life and the use of the Meeting House.

"Preceded by a comprehensive study of structure and fabric of the building, the work covered every part of the Meeting House from stripping and rearranging the Vestry area to the cleaning and insulation of the attic and the addition of a new lightning rod system in the tower. . . .

"Major change has been the reconstruction of the high pulpit with sounding board. . . . New strength has been given the auditorium floor, the fluted columns. The balcony has been firmly tied to the outer girders and reinforced at the organ console. The main roof is now of slate. The whole heating system, with gas-fired boilers, has been made modern, and a sprinkler system put into the vestry area and the tower attic.

"All major sills and timbers have been replaced where necessary. The vestry, subject of independent preliminary study, has modern class rooms, kitchen, offices, and the Manning Room for varied uses. The electrical system is entirely new. Lighting of the steeple by night shows in distinctive manner the beauty of the design. The auditorium has new carpets, pew cushions, and special pieces of furniture chosen to harmonize with their surroundings."

VI. Sources of Information

Norman M. Isham, The Meeting House of the First Baptist Church in Providence. A History of the Fabric (Providence: The Akerman-Standard Company, 1925). This book, 33 pages long and illustrated with pictures and drawings, is the most complete and the standard history of the building.

Walter C. Bronson, The History of Brown University (Providence, 1914), pp. 63 ff.

John Hutchins Cady, The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence 1636-1950 (Providence, Rhode Island: The Book Shop, 1957), pp. 26, 49, 50.

Antoinette Forrester Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island (Richmond, Virginia: Garrett and Massie, 1937), pp. 271-280.

Henry Russell Hitchcock, Jr., Rhode Island Architecture (Providence: Rhode Island Museum Press, 1939), pp. 23-25, plate 15.

Old Providence. A Collection of Facts and Traditions Relating to Various Buildings and Sites of Historic Interest in Providence. (Providence, Rhode Island: The Merchants National Bank of Providence, 1918), pp. 24-25.

Charles A. Place, "From Meeting House to Church in New England," Old Time New England, vol. XIII, no. 2, p. 69 ff., no. 3, pp. 111 ff., no. 4, pp. 149 ff., and vol XIV, no.1, pp. 4 ff.

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect
National Park Service
February 1962.